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Studies in American Social Conditions—4

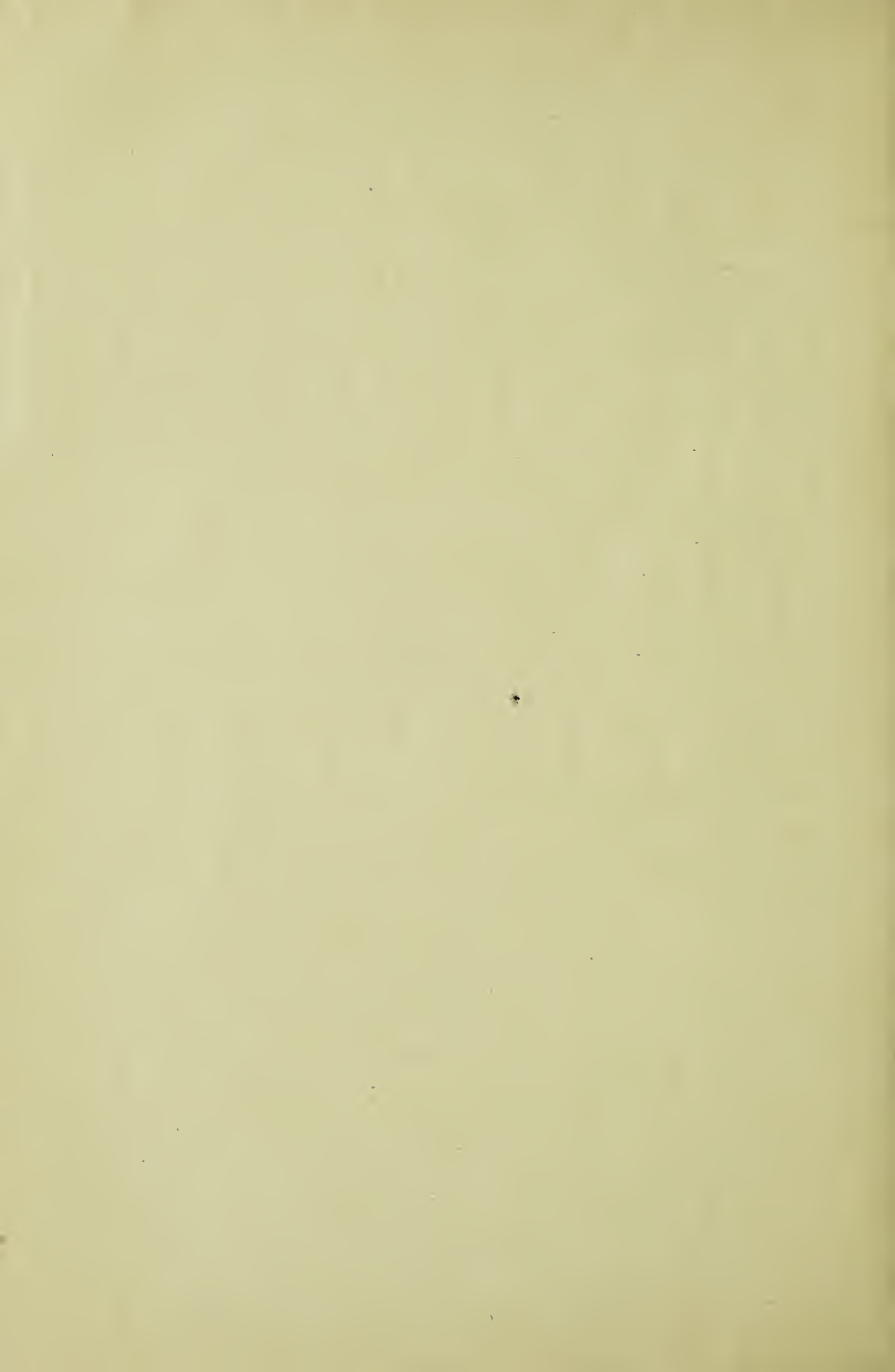
The Labor Problem

Edited by

Richard Henry Edwards

Madison, Wisconsin

April, 1909



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The Social Problems Group Idea

It is agreed among social workers that enough reliable information about our social conditions has been amassed to stir all thoughtful citizens, were the facts but generally known. It is likewise agreed that enough lines of solution have been proposed to make effective war on the forces of greed, lust, and death, were those solutions but widely and earnestly attempted. It is an immediate necessity, therefore, to get the ear of all right-minded men and to direct their attention to the naked facts of our social conditions till they be stirred to intelligent and persistent action. The Social Problems Group Idea is aimed at this necessity. It embraces a definite and tested plan for the constructive study of American Social Questions from the popular point of view. It connotes the wide spreading of reliable facts, the grip of those facts upon the social conscience, and intelligent action in cleaning up bad conditions. It is in brief, this—that a group of men meet regularly from time to time to consider the salient facts of our leading social problems; that they candidly discuss those facts and the proposed solutions, and that they take individual or united action toward solving the problems acute in their community. The plan is adaptable to widely different types of mind and to men of all

schools in political, social, or religious faith. A group can be formed anywhere without formalities, through the mutual desire of a few men, the choice of a leader, and agreement as to time and place of meeting.

An account of the original Group which was formed at Madison, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1906 will be found in an article in *Charities and the Commons* for October 17, 1908. A reprint of that article, which tells how to prepare for and conduct the meetings and touches upon the duties of the leader can be secured from the address given below.

In view of the fact that the original group met in a Christian church, the question of the reality and extent of the contribution made by the teaching of Jesus to the solution of each problem was considered. Those who desire to study the problems from this point of view are referred to "Christianity and the Social Crisis" by Walter Rauschenbush, Macmillan, New York, 1907, \$1.50; to "Jesus Christ and the Social Question" by F. G. Peabody, Macmillan, New York, \$1.50 (fifty cent edition Grosset and Dunlap, New York); to "The Social Significance of the Teachings of Jesus" by J. W. Jenks, International Committee, Y. M. C. A., 1906, 75c. and the books to which they refer.

Parallel studies upon ten problems are appearing in the following order as rapidly as the exigencies of editing and printing will permit:

1. The Liquor Problem.
2. The Negro Problem.
3. Immigration.
4. The Labor Problem.

5. Poverty.
6. Excessive and Concentrated Wealth.
7. Municipal Government.
8. The Children of the Cities.
9. The Increase of Crime and the Administration of Criminal Justice.
10. The Treatment of the Criminal.

These studies are sold at a nominal price, 10 cents each, postage 2c, for all except the Labor Problem which is 20c postpaid. The entire series including a reprint of the Charities article is sold at \$1.15 postpaid. One hundred copies of any study, except the Labor Problem, or ten sets of the entire series, will be sold at \$10.50, postpaid. One hundred copies of the Labor Problem are sold at \$18.00, postpaid. Order from the editor, enclosing the cash.

Suggestions for Use

The use of this study upon The Labor Problem is in no way confined to Social Problems Groups.

1. It may also be used for personal study. References to concise statements of fact in readable form are given for those who desire a brief but orderly survey of the problem. Those who desire more scientific matter will find it here, as well.

2. Interesting questions for club, high school, and collegiate debates will be found in taking up the comparative effectiveness of proposed solutions.

3. A survey course of instruction in American Social Conditions adaptable to varied institutions can be based

on the material here furnished together with like material upon other problems appearing in parallel form.

4. It is especially adaptable to use in civic organizations, social settlement clubs, betterment leagues, labor unions, Y. M. C. A. classes, granges, men's clubs in churches, business men's associations, and men's clubs in general, where the basis for a constructive study of the problem is desired. For such organizations and for Social Problems Groups where rapidity of treatment is desired, one meeting should be given to each of the main topics under the problem and to each of the main lines of solution.

Many groups will prefer to make a more thorough consideration of the problem which is of course highly desirable.

The Labor Problem

The "Labor Problem" has to do with the frictions which arise between employers and employees, with the evils in the working conditions of the wage earning classes, and, from the point of view of public interest, with the improvement of these conditions. Many kinds of difficulties are included in it, specific questions of the terms of employment, and general questions of public welfare, questions both economic and social. They are sometimes simple matters to be adjusted between an employer and his employees, sometimes complex and far reaching problems which involve the nation, such as the coal strike of 1902. They have sprung from the rapid development of modern industry and the many transformations which it has wrought.

This development has been phenomenal for the invention of new machinery and methods, for the extreme concentration in the hands of a few of the powers of industrial control, and for the enormous increase in the size of the output. The factory system, with highly complex and costly machinery, has become general and the wages system universal. Work in the factories has been subdivided among many workers and the piece work system of payment widely introduced. With the enlargement of

the output have come widening markets, sharper competition, and much higher capitalization. In some industries an aggregation of capital has made possible the combination of a number of factories under one management, and the defeat of small competitors by a practical control of the market.

As industry becomes more highly centralized, and the corporation replaces the individual employer, the personal connection between employer and employee is lost. The worker's individuality, his bargaining power, and the sense of his personal value are often lost with it. The pace at which the machines are run has been speeded up and this has forced a sharper intensity of exertion which results in shortening the working period of the wage earner's life. The organization of industry gathers the workers into factory towns and districts where women and children often work in the mills. As free land in the West has gradually disappeared, the status of the workers in American life has grown more definitely fixed. "Once a wage earner, always a wage earner," is coming to be true. Unskilled, immigrant, and casual laborers have increased in number rapidly.

The development of modern industry has not failed to bring benefits to employees as well as to employers, and yet grievous conditions exist in many localities and forms of work. The Pittsburgh Survey has shown the prevalence of the twelve hour day and the seven day week under conditions of great strain and liability to accident in the manufacture of iron and steel. The investigation of the Chicago Stock yards revealed a condition so unsanitary as to shock the nation and a labor situation well nigh intolerable, despite the enormous profits accruing from

the business. The misery of the lives of sweat-shop and tenement workers in the great cities, especially of women and children under the sweating system can hardly be over-stated. Their hours are measured by the limits of human endurance and their pay by the dire necessities of abject poverty. The annual average of 8000 workers maimed and 2000 killed in the coal mines is a sufficient indication of the danger in the miner's life. It is estimated that a total of 500,000 workers were killed or injured during 1908, in American industry, not counting deaths or illness due to occupational diseases. The more dangerous forms of work must always be done at a human sacrifice, but a large proportion of present accidents could be prevented by the use of machinery guards, safety appliances, and suitable precautions. Notwithstanding the steady improvement of conditions in many industries, there is still an enormous amount of entirely needless injury and reckless waste of human life.

Unemployment is one of the most complex questions in the Labor Problem. It is most grievous in times of business depression, but even in a normal condition of the labor market there are large numbers of unemployed who must act as the reserve force of the industrial army. Unemployment is traceable in some cases to personal defects, to sickness, accidents, or vicious habits; in others to social causes, to seasonal trades, commercial depressions, an irregular supply of work, the introduction of new machinery, or an over-supply of immigrant labor. It varies greatly, but is always imminent in the average wage earner's life. Hon. Carroll D. Wright said for Massachusetts for the year 1895-6: "About one-third of the total number of persons engaged in remunerative labor were

unemployed at their principal occupation about one-third of the working time." The full import of this bare statement, which is not far from a safe generalization for the country, can only be reckoned in terms of the hunger, sickness, misery, and gloom, which haunt the lives of those who live on the narrow border lands of destitution.

The conditions of women's labor and child labor deserve especial study. The increasing entrance of women into industry to tend machines, and to do the lighter forms of work, many of which were formerly done in the home, has a tendency to reduce the wages of men. Competition frequently exists between them, and women are willing to work for less. This tends to set up a reduced wage scale, based on the work of two or more members of the family, instead of one. The physical endowment of women makes them far more susceptible than men to the increasing strain of industry. They are more difficult to unite for common ends, and are less powerful to resist oppression. Their conditions need to be especially safe-guarded for health and morality, but are often thoroughly bad in these respects, with wages low, and hours excessive. Laundries, breweries, department stores, and contractors in the clothing trade are often among the chief offenders. The protection of public health, safety, morals, and the general welfare are involved in these conditions, for the fundamental institutions of motherhood, home, and healthy offspring are threatened.

A million American children, under fourteen years of age, are wage earners, according to reliable estimates. They are employed in coal mines, southern cotton mills, glass factories, the street trades, and in many other ways. In no other phase is American industry so ruthless of hu-

man life. It is not only a blot upon the national honor, but a frightful moral and economic waste. Child labor is closely related as one of the causes, to casual labor and unemployment, for when vitality is burned out in childhood a weak and shiftless maturity inevitably results.

Throughout the present system of industry there runs a line of demarcation between the interests of the employer and the employee. The conflict for larger shares in the product of industry between these two sets of interests reveals itself in the labor problem. While the employer is dependent upon the employee for his success, his larger resources give him a more stable position and place him on a vantage ground in the struggle. His interests are primarily financial. He must maintain a surplus of income over outgo. Competition forces him to buy so low, to manufacture so economically and to sell his product at such a price that he can make a reasonable profit. He must reckon on fluctuations in supply and demand in their effect upon costs and prices, on depreciation in plant, and on various other contingencies. These factors largely determine his attitude toward hours, wages, and conditions of labor. He necessarily looks upon labor as one item in a complex situation and comes to treat it as a commodity.

The employee, on the other hand, brings to the employer his chief possession, his labor power. His own welfare and that of his family depend upon it. His entire life is vitally concerned in his labor contract, and in the supply of work. This determines his point of view, for the labor struggle means to him all the higher values of life, the chance to develop mind and heart in a worthy home, education for his family, and the means of spiritual up-

lift. He naturally seeks wages, hours, and working conditions which will insure him a large return for his effort without impairment of his working power.

While there is no necessary hostility between labor and capital, as such, these divided interests of employers and employees have rendered industrial strife inevitable. When grievances arise and friendly negotiations fail, the weapons most frequently used are strikes and lockouts, blacklists and boycotts. In the strike the employees unite to stop work, without relinquishing their positions, in the attempt to improve their conditions of labor, usually to secure higher wages, shorter hours or the right to bargain collectively.

The lockout is the counterpart of the strike and occurs when the employer shuts out his employees because of their refusal to work under conditions which he dictates. Many strikes are in essence lockouts because the employer, instead of suspending work, makes a condition so hard that it virtually forces a strike. The boycott occurs when measures are taken to deprive the employer of customers, or of materials necessary to his business. The blacklist, on the other hand, is sometimes used by employers to follow up and debar from employment at their trade, men who have incurred their displeasure through activity in strikes, or for other reasons.

It is impossible to make generalizations of value in regard to the present conditions of industrial conflict upon the basis of the labor situation as a whole. It must be studied feature by feature and industry by industry, with close regard to local conditions, and the industrial system involved. Side by side with the factory system exist relics of the guild system, the merchant-capitalist system,

and the middleman-contractor or sweating system. Conditions vary greatly in different localities for the same industry, and in the same locality for different industries. The problem may seem to be acute where warfare is aggressively waged, and yet conditions be worse where there is little sign of strife. Many factors enter in as elements of variation. The personal attitudes of employers and employees, their comparative strength of organization, the kinds of grievances, the methods employed in enforcing demands or adjusting grievances, the general conditions of prosperity or depression,—these and other factors enter in to vary the intensity of friction.

The Labor Problem admits of no simple solution. It is apparent that no single form of effort is applicable to the wide variety of difficulties involved. A vast and many-sided human problem necessitates a multiple solution. The ideal is a far cry. Its achievement will be a long drawn struggle. Accurate justice, industrial democracy, and perfect adjustments will only be approached by many and varied efforts, some coercive and some generous. The human touch and a fair consideration by employers and employees, each for the interests of the other, are perhaps the most pressing needs.

Employers' associations and labor unions are not organized for the fundamental solution of the problem, but rather, to secure larger shares of the product of industry. They have each relied less upon moral suasion than upon the power of business compulsion. Employees have organized more widely than employers in order to overcome the natural handicap against them. Nearly all labor unions have their national organizations which are joined in the American Federation of Labor, representing nearly

2,000,000 workers. The national organizations help to unify trade consciousness, to standardize conditions of competition, and to lend reliability to trade agreements. "The right of working men to combine, and to form trade unions," says Mr. Andrew Carnegie, "is no less sacred than the right of the manufacturer to enter into associations and conferences with his fellows. My experience has been that trade unions, upon the whole, are beneficial to both labor and capital." The unions put their greatest emphasis upon a reduction in the number of hours to meet the nervous strain, upon higher wages to meet the greater cost of living, and upon the right to collective bargaining, which includes the right of association, free speech, and the refusal to work with non-members.

Welfare work has been undertaken by many employers on behalf of their employees. Lunch and rest rooms, schools, hospitals, libraries, and the like, have frequently been provided, together with a social secretary to represent the employer. Pensions and sickleave are sometimes granted. The results of welfare work have been both promising and disappointing. It has smacked of charity rather than justice in some establishments, and often been used as a cloak to cover industrial evils. Profit sharing has met similar difficulties and been treated with suspicion where the books of the company are not open to inspection. Many labor unions have developed educational and social features, and insurance benefits against sickness, accident, and unemployment.

The trade agreement, which is, perhaps, the most hopeful form of joint effort for the achievement of industrial peace, is based upon collective bargaining. In it the or-

ganized workers are able to bargain on equal terms with their employers. It is illustrated on a large scale in the agreements which have been made between the United Mine Workers of America and the mine owners of the North Central states. Conciliation usually involves the entrance of a third party into a labor dispute and the adjustment of difficulties through the offices of one not personally familiar with the details of the business. Arbitration may be voluntary or legal and enters the field after the contending parties have shown themselves unable to come to an agreement. It renders authoritative decisions.

Among the idealistic proposals affecting the labor problem, the socialist movement in its various forms is the most conspicuous. It conceives the class conflict as fundamental and inevitable in the present order. It sees a single line of solution in the elimination of private property from industry and aims at the common ownership of the raw materials, the tools and the product. It holds that when capitalism is eliminated, conflicting interests will be abolished, and the problems of industry be solved.

A more practical idealism, however, points to the reform of present abuses through a long drawn battle for justice within the ranks of industry, through an arousal of public opinion to the nature and extent of existing evils, through many and varied social reforms, through the institutions which make for the social and moral uplift of the people, and through the power of labor legislation.

The public enters the problem as an organized force in labor legislation. The regulation of conditions by law is most needed where labor organizations are undeveloped

or weak. Constitutional objections have arisen in several states and under the federal constitution, but this legislation is upheld on the ground of the police power of the state which includes the protection of the safety, morals, and welfare of the public. The Supreme Court of the United States has made plain that the state legislatures may reasonably regulate the hours of labor for men as well as women wherever health is endangered. The chief objects toward which legislation has been directed are the limitation of hours, the protection of women and children, the improvement of sanitary conditions, protection from dangerous machinery, and thorough factory inspection. An increasingly enlightened public conscience is thus making itself effective.

Much is being accomplished by reform organizations which bring hidden conditions to light, focus attention upon them, stir public opinion, and help to correct abuses. The Association for Labor Legislation seeks to secure the passage of uniform laws in the various states. The National Child Labor Committee aims at the overthrow of child labor. The Women's Trade Union League seeks to improve the conditions of women workers by forming and fostering trade unions among them. The Consumers' League seeks to increase the demand for goods made under clean and healthful conditions. These and many other agencies are at work to improve the relations between employers and employees, to overthrow industrial evils, and to improve the working and living conditions of the wage earning classes.

Grateful acknowledgment is here made to Professor Richard T. Ely, of the University of Wisconsin, author of "The Labor Movement in America," etc., who has revised and approved the following bibliography; to Miss Ellen Isabel True, class of 1908, of the Wisconsin Library School, who prepared it in fulfillment of the requirements of graduation; to the Wisconsin Library Commission for the loan of the type employed in its own publication of this bibliography (American Social Questions, Number 3); and to Miss Mary Emogene Hazeltine, Preceptor of the Wisconsin Library School, for her valued assistance in the preparation of this study.

The Labor Problem

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A concrete presentation of facts, devised for use as a text book, and forms an excellent basis of study.

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Affords material on all phases of social life and reform.

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- Adams, T. S.** Labor problem and its genesis (in Adams, T. S. and Sumner, H. L. *Labor problems*. 1905. p. 3-15).
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The Proposed Solutions

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